3 1761 04133 3329

A Master of the French School

Forster

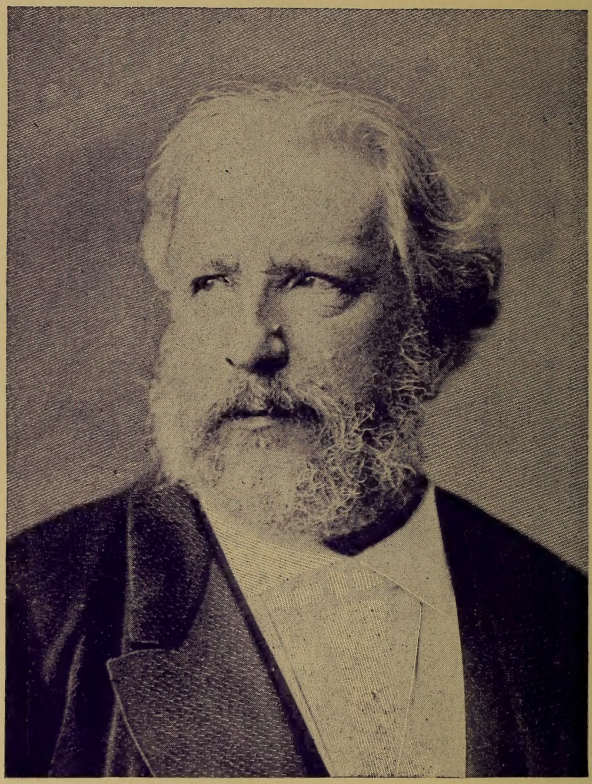
A Master of the French School

BY

J. W. L. FORSTER

PUBLISHED AT THE ARIEL PRESS
WESTWOOD, MASS., U.S.A.

330208
15. 8. 36.



WILLIAM ADOLPHE BOUGUEREAU

DEDICATED TO MY FELLOW STUDENTS OF
THE ACADÉMIE JULIAN

To Reader and Critic

THE pages bound herein were first written by request for a magazine that has since ceased publication; and they reappear, also by request, with a paragraph or two added because of the recent passing of this "Master of the French School."

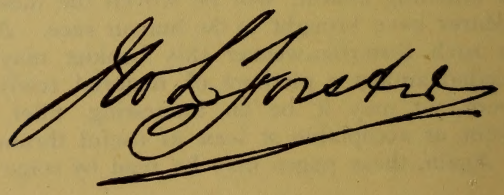
A life history of William Adolphe Bouguereau would make a valuable addition to the world's biographies. Great painters, like composers and poets, are race heroes, whose legacies of honor and renown fall by right of inheritance to every life they gladden or inspire. To none is the right therein proscribed by boundary of states or by race limitations. No earmark of poverty or of wealth can deprive the responsive spirit of his great gain as beneficiary in what these men bequeath of high and worthy purpose. Although they may have given allegiance to but one flag—the flag of their own country—yet when they appear before the world all flags salute, and all dip in reverence as they pass away.

Biographers or historians may, to use another metaphor, be already weaving with busy shuttles the story of the life of this great master. If so the warp of it will be of good fibre, for his life was good; and into this, with rare pattern and colors of unfading charm, will be woven the message his picures have brought to the human race. Although to such historian-weaver this booklet may not be needed amidst a plethora of material ready for his loom, yet may it be an interesting fillet for his skein, or acceptable at least as useful thrum.

Again, these pages may be read by some one in-

to whose hand a larger volume may some day be placed, or by one whose eyes may feast upon the beauty of examples of the painter's work; to either of these they will come as a foreword. Should they fall perchance into the hands of former detractors I am sure the spirit in which they are written will command respect, and the statements they contain will receive the courteous examination they invite. If by others their message is heard in the busy life of affairs and men be taught by them the joy—the exquisite joy—of high ideals and of thoroughness in their pursuit they will have fulfilled a worthy purpose in being written.

What I have chosen to say of M. Bouguereau is the least that could be said in honor and fairness to the man himielf or in justice to the work he has left behind. A critical analysis of his work, in the popular sense, has not been attempted, as I preferred to leave this to the professional inquisitor; but, instead, I have given a rapid synthetic sketch, grouping the chief features of his character and handicraft as studied from the near view-point of a pupil. Such a sketch is sufficient in itself, provided it be accepted as a sketch and not mistaken for what, with elaboration, might constitute a study. The holding in leash of an eager pen has marked with some constraint what deserved a fuller—indeed the fullest—presentment and discussion. And yet there will have been wisdom in this brevity if it awakens in some one, better equipped than I am, the impulse to write the things I have left unsaid.



Love Alert

A MASTER OF THE FRENCH SCHOOL

THE Fine Arts hold an indefinable charm for all humanity. This is true for the reason that into no man's work comes so much of his personality as into that of the artist. The very brushwork his hands have wrought, the shaping of the creations of his own particular fancy, his personal interpretation of characters variously seen of men awaken always a lively interest. At each succeeding Salon or Academy his new pictures are awaited with friendly curiosity. In the case of the mediocre painter this is true to the wide circle of his friends, but with the great all eyes, whether they are friendly or otherwise, are on the *qui vive* to meet the challenge of his works.

It is probably safe to say that of all the great painters of France this was peculiarly true of Mons. Bouguereau. It may have

been because the range of his adventurous pencil was so wide, perhaps it was the style of craftmanship so pronouncedly his own, or it may have been the certainty of a new and interesting harmony of light and line that made expectancy alert. But this interest was alive and did not cease even into his old age.

There is something especially suggestive in the death of a great painter. We frame in memory his last seen canvas, being careful that each tone and mass and form can be recalled, in the pathetic knowledge that never again will the hand that wrought so deftly take up the brushes, and our eyes shall look in vain for his masterful surprises. A sort of visual silence reigns over the familiar spaces where his pictures once had been.

Now that he has been mustered from the ranks of living painters there has arisen in many minds the question, what place will be assigned to his work in the judgment of the future. Will the form and features of M. Bouguereau be missing from the Pan-

Love's Whisperings

theon of great painters; or will they appear in the forefront of that galaxy of genius for all time? The nation to which he gave three-score years of incessant work has honored him during his life with the highest place in its gift; but what will posterity do with his name? For half a century his name has been upon the lips of kings. He has been held in esteem by the courts of Europe. But by a not unusual paradox Bouguereau has in all those years been the subject of malediction, the butt of envy, the best cursed name in two continents.

By a significant coincidence, during the last five years of his life, as there came a dimming of vision and a faltering of the hand that had ever been so sure of touch, there came also a reticence in criticism, or at least a modification of its asperity. This has been followed by a reverent silence since the wreath and the memory alone remain to us. Does this mean that the pens which had been lent so long for the writing of phrases dipped in vinegar may, in the years to come, be given to odes and

eulogies written in honey and balm? Such is quite possible and even likely, for two important reasons. These two reasons grow, the one out of the criticism itself, and the other out of the painter's work.

Of criticisim it may be said that it rarely, if ever, reached beyond the artist's style. Catch-word and invective were freely used, but deeper than surface method the arrows did not pierce. The underlying great questions of theme and motive and principle rest unimpeached. Upon these must the deliberate verdict of the future be given.

Of his technique, which has been the cause of so much acid, I believe it to be so intimately a part of the life of the man as to be safe in the custody of the future. But it might be well to note the high tribute paid in the many imitators his manner of working has found; and to add, that not one of them has been able to catch the unrivalled excellence of its charm.

The career of our subject was no meteor-flash, but rather the waxing in magnitude of a star in the constellation that has circled

across the later nineteenth century. His success has been the triumph of ardent, tireless and capacious toil. As a lad of eleven years in La Rochelle, or rather at Pons (1836) he won, by good application, a scholarship in drawing. This brought him to Bordeaux School of Design; but it was the genius for work that brought him to Paris and to his winning the Prix de Rome in 1850. Nor did he rest with this achievement, for a steady gain can be seen in his subsequent work, visible especially in the direction of finer thought and richer color, which contribute so much to the value of what he has given us.

The process of years marked no great changes or periods in his style. There was nothing of the fickle weather-vane about the character of M. Bouguereau. In fact, there seems wanting entirely that radical readiness to fall in with any new influence that might seek the fellowship of such a man. This may account for the lack of that splendor of genius which bursts in occasional *tours de force*, or yields itself to a catchy applause-winning cleverness. But there was

by no means any lack of splendid courage or of well directed power.

In following his career it is a pleasure to note that while the spirit of it is unique his work often bears intimate relation to the life around him; and as often is it an expression of his own heart moods. His first important picture afer his return from Italy, "The Triumph of Martyrdom," is a truly devout inspiration. And although the years of the last Empire marked, in France, a moral decadence that found swift echo in its art — a decadence from which, by the way, France has seemed slow to recover— he gave us during those years many pictures full of domestic charm. The purity of his spirit refused to defile itself with the wanton against which it had to contend, and one can indeed fancy the pain it gave to a nature like his. We are told that the impulse to paint "Orestes Pursued by the Furies" was a jeremiad against the spirit of the times, or a prophecy of impending and inevitable doom.

The end of the Empire found him a vol-

unteer on the ramparts of Paris. The bitterness of that "baptism of fire," followed by the still more sad and sickening year of the Commune, were not without their influence upon the artist. In this relation his "Madonna of Consolation" has always seemed a fitting expression in every way of the patriot soul that saw his country postrate in the abandon of humiliation and loss, and sought the consolation he would here proclaim.

Historically, Monsieur Bouguereau was a product of the First Empire. The undertow of the wave of romanticism, which had rolled forward and spent itself earlier in the century, was partially caught in the advancing wave of classicism that marked the movement of Louis-Philippian art and literature. We are not surprised, therefore, when he gave rein to his true impulses, to find him roving in the realm of classic romance. In this field he was in his element.

Bouguereau's style and method were his own. He was no imitator. Every theme or subject evolved into picture form un-

der his brush is invested with free and graceful lines. Within these lines and in the delicate modelling of his figures, a whole orchestra of color harmonies play without the blare of brass. I cannot leave the question of his coloring without a word to those who fancy it the weak spot in the rampart that must ultimately yield to their tireless bombardment. The word is this: that while others have chosen to paint the skin tint of flesh with the sun-burn or wind brown on it, he has chosen the prismic concord of the pure untainted flesh. His coloring is without the least stain of the material that is metaphorically thrown at him; and when studied it is found to glow with a purity and richness much more refined and ripe than most of the color-work which recieves the praise that falls so far short of reaching him. I had opportunity on one occasion, in his own studio, wnen we were discussing some question of art, of having two or more pictures by other eminent artists placed beside one of his own. The color contrast was startling. I had, up to that moment,

yielded my convictions in a measure to the popular clamor—that Bouguereau was not a "colorist." But here the effect of his work was to make that of the others look black and crude; or the effect of theirs was to make the clear notes of his color scale ring out in a tender, strong and satisfying music.

His drawing is inimitable. His figures are marvels of knowledge and of beauty. Detail is not trifled with, but is reverently painted in its relation to the whole. His muscles are flexible, articulations free; and in the gentle, as well as the brisk and breezy, movements of eye and limb, a higher power exercises lordship over every vassal charm. Thought is evident, whether you follow his luring pencil away into the semi-real mythology, the dream realm that gave form to every impulse, emotion and aspiration of human consciousness; where the elder spiritualism peopled the groves of the mind with busy beings, whose kinship with the fully human was a never-ceasing influence upon his virtue and his song; and it

is not less evident if you follow his limning of subjects gleaned from the bustling and sordid Nineteenth Century. But the former seems to have held him by the fascination of a quaint simplicity of thought, through which, though he illustrated his theme and story in pure and perfect forms borrowed from highest modern types, the mystic suggestiveness of the long ago pervades every situation portrayed. As a daring searcher after truth in form he caught the charm of truth; his pencil seemed to probe the secret of every play of expression. It is here wherein his greatest strength lies. This supremacy over the possibilities of the human figure in every conscious or unconscious mood is the secret of his greatness.

The wish is sometimes felt that he would have left to our imagination a part of the task of guessing at meanings—the allurement of mystery that fascinates in that it half satisfies. But what could you say to a man who told you, "It is a trick of the coward that leaves in suggestion the lower beginnings of an idea,

The World's Hope

which with courage and power might be uttered in higher and grander measure?" And again when he told you, "A theme given merely in suggestive effect is the subterfuge of incompetence, whereas knowledge and skill are capable of telling truths that are deeper and more sublime," what answer could you make? We were compelled to recognize in sentiments like these the heart of the hero, and in deference uncover the head. He used to say to us, "You leave unpainted what you cannot see; it is ignorance that makes you blind; it is inattention makes you ignorant; inattention is imbecile." We whinced under the thrust, but blessed him with a grateful heart, a little time later, when his motive and meaning were better understood.

Monsieur Bourguereau was not given to old saws, and had nothing pedagogic about his manner of giving instruction. Serious always, and very much in earnest, he gave, with noticeable brevity, the salient and cardinal truths which safeguard the painter who has the wisdom to make them his own.

These simple and emphatic maxims reveal to us the pathway of his own life; his long, strong wrestle with discouragement, the strength of his convictions, his high ideals and his superlative respect for mature and perfect thought.

The same spirit directed the painting of a puzzled school-girl at her "Difficult Sum" as would make immortal "Homer's Guide." The "Birth of Venus," the World's Medal picture in 1878, is worth referring to as a triumph in the treatment of light. This is the element that becomes the fair goddess, howsoever viewed; and M. Bouguereau gave us light with a master-touch, and without any trick or cajolery of color.

He has not limited his choice of themes to one special line, by any means, as a perusal of the long list of his subjects will show. If you compel him to submit to the artists' bane, classification, he might be termed a moralist only in such pictures as "Covetousness" and "Hesitation between Love and Riches." And so the "Martyr's Triumph," the "Flagellation," "Pieta," "Ad-

Virgin of Consolation

oration of the Magi," "Apotheosis of St. Vincent de Paul," and a great many more subjects of a religious character, give him a place of eminence in sacred art. "The Mower," "The Gleaner" and "Harvest Time" reveal his interest in the life of the tillers of the field, a life ennobled in the works of Breton and Dagnan Bouveret. But when he reverted to "Philomela and Procris," "Triumph of Venus," "Youth of Bacchus" and "Voices of Spring"—*voila son metier.* It was here the perennial spring of mystic and wonderful thought bubbled out with a chaste and noiseless joy.

Ever new and delightfully ungessed was the greeting that met the constant visitor to his studio in the quiet Rue Notre Dame des Champs. That inspiration does not fatigue the disciplined hand, must be true, for it seemed each time you went some new love tumbled from the bower, a film of light or of shadow arched some new curve, or twinkled and melted in a new outlook for the soul of his dreams.

I heard a lady say to him, "Oh, Monsieur

Bouguereau, you do get so many lovely faces and figures; I'm just delighted with them." And so she rattled on beside the spell-silent canvases, as though they held only pretty cheeks and knuckles and knees, oblivious of the spirit, the fantasy or the divinity that competed with each other for the fascination of all who might stand before them.

His works invite a far deeper study than they usually receive; for example take "The Garland," in the Art Gallery in Montreal. An elder sister sees only the wreath of summer flowers she places on her younger sister's head, and feels only the local impulse of the action, while the younger recipient seems to look beyond into a future felt for the first time but not understood. No emotion heaves the little breast, such as a conscious possibilitiy or ambition entering the soul would do. It is a mental awakening only, yet who has perceived it? Is it possible that men are satisfied to admire Bouguereau's sweetly painted toes and ankle lines and fail to read the hidden

meanings of his *motifs?* Referring to his "Whispers of Love," exhibited for the first time in 1889, happy cherubs breathe into a maiden's ear those new thoughts that have come from the bower of love, somewhere; an inspiration heaves the frame, that flutters as in the presence of an imposing guest; but the presence is unseen. Expectancy looks outward, but the receptive spirit feels a deeper joy, undefined, within; for the great soul that enwraps all nature asks of her a more intimate acquaintance. It is love's whisper

I regret to say it is only in the originals the subtle moods of expression can be studied with most pleasure, for the camera, one-eyed and soulless, leaves them unreproduced.

Of his dominant influence for some years in the Salon of France much more than a paragraph would be needed to give the facts, or deal with them justly, and this sidelight upon his life would be better handled by some of his more intimate associates in its councils and affairs. It

will without doubt form an important chapter in some more pretentious volume, without which it would be quite incomplete. I am speaking only of the man and his art.

I have referred to the peerless daring of his pencil as a characteristic of Bouguereau, and to his unrivalled power in the deliniation of expression as an element of greatness in his art. I venture to hold that in the delicate and deep suggestion of *thought*, which is to be discerned in all his work, in the refined and scholarly uplift of his thought, and in the vast and varied leading of his thought are to be found a guarantee of the permanence of that greatness.

The great lesson of his life is that of self-mastery; and the influence of his art will ever be antiseptic and corrective, for it is healthy and pure. The product of his life could scarcely be any other. Nothing of the errant, or vagrant, or Bohemian; his courtship of the muse of his song has been constant and not fickle. Fads have been born and grown and shouted and died; contending dynasties of art have clamored and

"He is not here; He is risen"

fought and fallen; fashions have made fools of both critics and magazinists; theorists have cajoled the seers into predicting epoch-making permanency in movements that disappointed ere conviction had time to form; but, like men of kindred greatness, William Adolphe Bouguereau moved in the midst of all the hubbub unruffled by malice, untainted by envy, like a calm prophet who had a vision.